
H-France Review Vol. 21 (July 2021), No. 119

John Warne Monroe, *Metropolitan Fetish: African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2019. xvi + 368 pp. Maps, notes, index, gallery. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1501736353.

Review by Michelle Apotsos, Williams College.

John Monroe's 2019 volume, *Metropolitan Fetish: African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art*, unpacks the particular socio-political and cultural moment during which *art primitif* as an aesthetic category emerged within early twentieth-century Paris. Through an exploration of various connoisseurial personalities who, to quote Monroe, "played crucial roles in manipulating the meanings of objects, enlisting critics to teach the public how to see them, and cultivating collectors" (p. 294), Monroe underscores how, over a roughly fifty-year period, aesthetic perceptions and priorities not only created a highly fluid market for African objects within the elitist spaces of Parisian museums, galleries, auction houses, and private salons, but also generated a continuously evolving definition of *art primitif*. Consequently, the nature of *art primitif* during this era was a constantly moving target that gained diverse forms of socio-cultural and economic capital on its way to becoming a solidly situated Euro-centric paradigm, in turn highlighting the "art market's capacity for imbuing commodities with symbolic value at work" (p. 294).

Monroe begins by posing two questions: why France, and why African art? *Art primitif* as a category was birthed during a period when European colonialism was at its height and numerous emergent scientific disciplines, such as anthropology, were weighing in on the nature of the so-called primitive. France was a latecomer to these conversations, which enabled budding French connoisseurs to deploy "an unusual combination of imaginative license and cultural power in their efforts to make sense of the wooden masks and figures arriving in steadily growing numbers from African colonies" (p. 7). The galleries, salons, and exhibition spaces of the fashionable Parisian elite would subsequently become the spatial scaffolding for emergent canons of *art primitif*, for whom conceptualizations of authenticity would play a crucial role. In fact, the durability of authenticity as a qualifier of *art primitif* represents a key inquiry in this volume, defined not by one universal understanding of quality or formal elegance but, to quote James Clifford, as "a category defined and redefined in specific historical contexts and relations of power" (p. 9).^[1] This is also why France itself constituted such a strategic formative space in the creation of these metropolitan fetishes, with French collectors and dealers applying new identities and imaginaries to the surfaces of these objects like so many decorative flourishes.

The first chapter begins with one such metropolitan fetish: a large *Ngil* mask in the Fang style from the collection of early twentieth-century French art collector, Pierre V\'erit\'e. Auctioned off

at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris for 5.9 million euros in 2006, the mask becomes a *lieu de mémoire* from which the reader is led into the period from which it would derive its lasting aesthetic and economic capital: the early twentieth-century Parisian art scene, where qualities such as rarity and stylistic iconicity would serve as key indicators of an object's authenticity as *art primitif*. As sites of French fascination, such objects were informed by travelogue accounts, missionary narratives, and colonial reports detailing the supposed savagery of the individuals and communities that produced them. Yet these objects also spoke to "an emotional and spiritual intensity that the bland, inhibiting comforts of civilization had drained from European life" (p. 33), producing a natural rapport with aesthetic modernism. It was in this capacity, thus, that so-called *art nègre*--a heady mixture of "archaic quality" and "modern art" (p. 39)--was born, a fetishized paradigm applied to objects according to their ability to reflect "the power of a particular code--the one that underpins the Western idea of a universal, transcendent realm of aesthetic value" (p. 42).

It was this code, detailed in the second chapter, that would eventually enable early French connoisseurs to generate, in Monroe's words, "a new image of African sculpture, one that had very little to do with the original intentions of the people who produced the objects" but could be "appropriated, and redeployed strategically to achieve a remarkable range of different ends" (p. 42). Two formative figures in this process were Henri Clouzot and André Level, who constructed and promoted emergent ideas of *art primitif* largely through what Alois Reigl called the "age value" of an object, an overtly fetishized qualifier that, true to its name, placed a premium on the passage of time and the material trace or patina it left behind.^[2] Important to note, however, is that "age" within this context was less a scientifically valid quality and more an imagined attribute, used to generate a working practice of connoisseurship for *art nègre* while also functioning as a tool through which Clouzot and Level could claim to educate their core target audience--an elitist Parisian society that occupied a central position within Western art circles at the time--in the art of connecting *art nègre* with contemporary modernist sensibilities. Through such modes, Clouzot and Level were able to launch *art nègre*--the progenitor of *art primitif*--into the collecting currents of the Parisian art market using a toolkit of surface patina and modernist analogies.

Chapter three introduces probably the most colorful character of the volume--Paul Guillaume--who would become a key figure in making *art nègre* a decidedly avant-garde, yet paradoxically mainstream phenomenon. Notable about Guillaume was his particular skill in maneuvering Parisian society towards making *art nègre* not only an accepted aesthetic category, but a highly fashionable one as well. And he did this, according to Monroe, through "a timely bit of strategic fabrication" in which he "preserved the avant-garde aura of *art nègre* by hiding the extent to which its appreciation had begun to penetrate the broader cultural elite" (p. 88). This allowed him to "present himself as a heroic crusader against a backward cultural establishment while simultaneously benefiting from the prestige that very establishment's recognition conferred" (p. 89). This mixture of fashion, age-based connoisseurship, and an appreciation for the avant-garde with a dash of the spectacular became Guillaume's singular strategy, which would allow him to tap into what Monroe calls "the wide-spread fascination with things black--the vogue *nègre*--so prevalent in French culture during the 1920s" (p. 89). He was also able to simultaneously play on the widespread snobbery of the period, which was defined by one's ability to appreciate the aura of *art nègre* via a well-heeled connoisseurial sensibility.

Yet the emergence of ethnology as an academic discipline, and its focus on fact-based evidence and culture-specific knowledge, would challenge Guillaume's auratic brand of connoisseurship (chapter four). This, in conjunction with the movement of *art nègre* into the fashionable mainstream and the rise of surrealism as the new avant-garde in the 1930s, would catalyze the transformation of *art nègre* and its "audacity of taste" into *art primitif* and its "language of scholars" (p. 134). To this end, Guillaume's "anti-intellectual," pro-spectacle approach was quickly usurped by young curators such as George Henri Rivière, who would position science and art within a collaborative relationship through institutional exhibitionary tactics (p. 147). Whereas previous connoisseurs had been largely dismissive of applying targeted display strategies to *art primitif*, Rivière positioned display as key to promoting cross-cultural communication. From the aesthetic side, Rivière also promoted this interface through the surrealist publication *Documents*, which represented an avant-garde "manifestation of a new effort to approach African sculpture through the dual lens of art history and ethnography in the late 1920s" (p. 162).

Following Rivière would be the next great progenitor of *art primitif*, Charles Ratton, who would assume the throne previously occupied by Paul Guillaume as the most successful dealer of *art primitif* in Paris in the 1930s (chapter five). Occurring against the backdrop of the Great Depression and a Surrealist shift towards the arts of Oceania and the Americas as a mode of maintaining "their disruptive charge" (p. 178), Ratton would craft his reputation around cultural expertise and ethnographic scholarship. And while he would maintain certain established philosophies of *art nègre*—age value and no European influence—he would also attempt to broaden the category of *art primitif* through a more inclusive assemblage of forms. Perhaps his most successful skill, however, was his ability to be "many things to many people" (p. 178), allowing him to create a narrative for *art primitif* that "secur[ed] official recognition...underscored its 'classical' status, cultivat[ed] friends in the artistic avant-garde, broaden[ed] the canon of *art nègre* to reflect changing tastes, and participat[ed] directly in efforts to make African sculpture a potent symbol of diasporic black identity" (p. 178). This last element is particularly important, for his attention to *art primitif* as a "vehicle of cultural affirmation" (p. 212) for black diasporic communities in the United States and France gave him a credibility matched by his maintenance of "scholarly tenor" (p. 208). Thus, while he was a less spectacular figure than the likes of Guillaume, he was authoritative enough to cement conceptualizations of *art primitif* that, for better or worse, still resonate today.

The final chapter of the volume takes place in the 1930s and 1940s, where various colonial pavilions and the transition of the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro to the Musée de l'homme in 1938 seemed to reflect a "peculiar mixture of kitsch and connoisseurship" that nonetheless continued to trace the contours of *art primitif* according to various socio-political, economic, and cultural currents flowing through French society at the time (p. 241). Ranging from a desire to rein in the avant-garde, to the need to re-tailor the *art primitif* narrative towards privileging European influence, the stakeholders involved in the discipline at this time seemed to collectively favor an agenda of pseudo-assimilation with regards to *art primitif* that exercised control, not only over the acquisition of such objects, but also over their production and their representational systems.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that the topic of the volume's conclusion addresses the legacy of this period in the contemporary moment, in particular, the continuity of many of the formalized aspects of *art primitif* within contemporary art historical and museological practice. To this end, this volume was written in time to address French President Emmanuel Macron's 2018 large-

scale restitution attempt, which focused predominantly on objects currently located in the country's top cultural institutions. The fact that many of these objects are still displayed utilizing exhibitionary strategies developed in the early twentieth century seems to communicate that "[t]hese things from a distant land are to be perceived as art objects in the manner French people deem it fit to perceive art objects. That is why they have become universal; the universal is for the French eye to define" (p. 301). Such a statement plays to the primary strength of this volume in that it does not choose to focus on a singular object or group of objects, but positions objects collectively as memory terrains that illustrate how the discipline of *art primitif* was manipulated by French dealers and collectors into what would eventually become one of the West's ultimate fetishistic enterprises. Importantly as well, although Monroe identifies France as the formative space for this development, Monroe's narrative gives readers the analytical tools to pan out beyond France and see the broader narrative of "Africa" as it has been constructed by a Western mentality informed by both white saviorism and a paradoxical desire to build an "Other" in our own image. Both primary and secondary resources were exhaustively mined to this end, allowing Monroe to generate an intensive sketch of the various personalities involved in the launch of *art primitif* towards revealing the societal machinations of fashion and social hegemony that are still so operable in the contemporary period with regards to the creative production of non-Western spaces.

Similar attention is paid to the contextual specificity of the terminology used in this volume. Monroe takes important space in the preface to outline the strategy behind his use of terms such as "primitive," explaining that such labels "refer to a set of historically contingent Western ideas and visions of otherness, not to any kind of ethnographic reality" (p. ix). Thus framed, a type of alter-ego is created for these objects that Monroe then deploys as a foil. Somewhat less convincing are arguments made for eliminating quotation marks as signposts for volatile albeit "dated terminology" such as *nègre* ("most white French speakers of the early twentieth century did not consider it vulgar") (p. x). This may be a missed opportunity to revolutionize or evolve established terminological practices by delving deeper into the socio-cultural implications of their usage both then and now.

This situation is ironically reversed at the conclusion of this volume, where Monroe briefly details Macron's aforementioned shift in French cultural policy with regards to the repatriation of objects acquired during the colonial period. Here, Monroe takes a forceful stance, not only indicating that *art primitif* as an aesthetic paradigm represents "a classic example of the racist paternalism on which Western imperialism depended" (p. 293) but also that "perhaps in a world after empire, empowered both as memorials of a great kingdom and as 'universal masterpieces,' they [the objects] are ready to speak again" (p. 301). While the impulse towards advocacy is understandable, even admirable, after engaging in a project such as this one, there are nonetheless two critical issues at work here that need to be addressed with regards to our current post-colonial moment. The first is that repatriation, for all of its noble intentions, is still a type of soft power play imposed by the "haves" onto "have nots" as a gesture of benevolent imperialism. Secondly, these objects, as Monroe has so elegantly demonstrated, were rarely if ever allowed to "speak" within the context outlined in this volume; European dealers, collectors, curators, etc. did the speaking for them and many would argue that contemporary museological practices have done little to improve their communicative plight. Thus, perhaps a more effective use of this space would have been to explore how these types of power mechanisms continue to govern art market practices involving African and non-Western art in the contemporary period, revamping and updating the narrative of past connoisseurial practices to reflect their current iteration as a more

contemporary type of cultural neo-imperialism. After all, are we really “after empire” or has “empire” merely donned a new set of clothes? That being said, I would note that these are less critiques than points of further discussion around a truly remarkable volume that has something to offer both French and African art historians alike.

NOTES

[1] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 198.

[2] Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin” (1903), trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982): 21-51.

Michelle Apotsos
Williams College
ma11@williams.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172